Voodoo in Haiti

A Religious Ceremony at the Service of the 'Houngan' Called 'Tourism'

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Introduction

Voodoo is intimately linked to the culture and history of the Caribbean island of Haiti, yet paradoxically Haitians are predominantly Christians. It is said that Haitians are 80% Catholic and 100% Voodooist and religion is the mainstay of Haitian society. It is perhaps all that remains for the poor of a country which has been ravaged by centuries of political and economic unrest. And at a time when many of the Caribbean islands are prospering from a buoyant tourism industry, Haiti is still very much seen as an insecure destination (Higate and Henry 2009) and a place where the worst is always likely to happen (Bonnet 2010). Our objective is to establish a clear link between Voodoo events and tourism and identify if the two are compatible. Developing tourism offerings to include Voodoo events which are based on staged ceremonies could provide Haiti with a unique selling proposition that will enable the country to redevelop its tourism industry and stabilise its fragile economy. What must also be considered is that Voodoo emerged as the result of the introduction of slavery to the island. While the religion contributes significantly to the Haitian cultural identity, it is also linked to servility. The development of service industries like tourism is also reinforcing the notion of Haitians as servile and the introduction of Voodoo events, where visitors will pay to attend a service, may reinforce this.

The Caribbean is very diverse and only some of the islands are 'vested in the branding and marketing of paradise' (Sheller 2004: 23). For example the Dominican Republic, Haiti's

neighbour, is one of the most visited islands of the Caribbean, yet Haiti is very much the poor relation. Our key questions therefore are as follows: if tourism is to play a major role in stabilising Haiti's economy, can Voodoo events form part of tourism? If yes, what are the likely impacts of this on Haitians and on Voodoo as a religion? To answer these key questions we have selected a qualitative analysis supporting an inductive approach. As there is very little relevant literature, an analysis of Ian Thomson's 2004 travel journal '*Bonjour Blanc, a journey through Haiti'* will form a valuable and substantive part of this chapter particularly as Thomson notes there are no written theories or explanations of the history of Voodoo practices. This book is the tale of a life experience in Haiti and as such it has witness value and may be considered trustworthy (De Ascaniis and Grecco-Marasso 2011). It also functions as a microcosm of life in Haiti and provides detailed information on the tourism, events and hospitality sectors.

Academic literature on tourism very often highlights the benefits of the industry without providing substantiated evidence of those benefits (Holden 2013). There is a dearth of academic research associated with the tourism or events sectors in Haiti therefore this chapter will contribute to the meta-literature by focusing on how event tourism might have an impact on the cultural aspects of a destination, namely its religious practices and in our case on Voodoo ceremonies. Two elements are of interest in this chapter: firstly, the choice that some territories have to make between culture and money and the long term risk of losing their originality, either partially or wholly; secondly, establishing a link between slavery, Voodoo and tourism.

Haiti and Voodoo

A History in Brief

Haiti lies between the North Atlantic and the Caribbean Sea in the Greater Antillean archipelago. It occupies the western, smaller portion of the island of Hispaniola, which it shares with the Dominican Republic. Haiti is a former French colony, and in the 18th century it was one of the empire's richest overseas territories, fondly referred to as the 'Pearl of the Antilles'. The island's wealth was generated by a thriving exportation industry and to sustain growth, thousands of African slaves were transported to Haiti to bolster the workforce. The atrocious trade in humans was, at the time, considered to be a legitimate form of commerce. A total of approximately 18 million Africans were exported into slavery between 1500 and the late 1800s (Reader 1998). The large Haitian slave community, commanded by a comparatively small group of white masters, staged an uprising in 1791. This led to a 13 year war of liberation, with General Toussaint L'Ouverture leading the Haitian slave army to freedom. Consequently, while retaining its links with France, Haiti became the first black republic. Since this declaration of independence, the country has endured more than two centuries of oppression, occupation, unrest and rebellion. Sustained political and social turmoil has deeply scarred the nation and today Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the world.

The Haitian Economy

Between 1800 and 2009, Haiti's service sector rose in value from less than 5% to approximately 60% of the GDP replacing the dwindling exportation trade. The development was led by a change of activity on the part of the majority of the population (Paul *et al* 2010) and featured a developing tourism industry.

Tourism is often described as one of the world's largest industries (Cooper and Hall 2008: 252) and the Caribbean has long been a popular destination due to the images of sunny, white beach paradise islands, colourful cocktails and lively music that the name invokes. Capitalising on this image, Haiti became the most popular tourist destination in the Caribbean in the period between the 1940s to the 1960s (Séraphin 2010) and as such attracted an international jet set. Mick Jagger, Charles Addams and Jackie Kennedy were among those who popularised Haiti (Thomson 2004) and by 1956; visitor numbers had risen to nearly 70,000.

Such popularity was to be short-lived, as in 1957 François Duvalier became dictator. His 14 year reign of terror crippled the tourism industry and visitor numbers steeply declined. In 1990, the country instated a democratic government and for a short time the country stabilised. Further economic and socio-political crises have continued to take their toll and by 2004, the number of tourists had dropped again to around 240,000, a reduction of 54% in 17 years. The earthquake in 2010 further damaged the tourism industry and the Haitian resolve. Today, Haiti is one of the least visited islands in what is one of the world's most popular regions.

Voodoo

Voodoo derives from the West African religion Vodun and was developed in Haiti by African slaves. The religion was used a means to cope with the degradations of slavery including being forced to convert to Christianity and speak Créole. Voodoo became a way for the slaves

to retain a connection with their African roots and also to retain some of their humanity (Damoison and Dalembert 2003). It also helped slaves to resist their master's cultural oppression (Saint-Louis 2000) and to adapt to their new environment.

As a religion, Voodoo is based on the belief in a *Grand Maître*, a Great Master or Creator, as well as several *loa* or spirits. The practise of Voodoo involves ritual celebrations at a temple led by a *Houngan* or priest. Metraux (1958) explains that a good Houngan will perform many roles: priest, healer, fortune teller, exerciser and entertainer. Voodoo rituals involve recognisable religious practises such as prayers, music and dance alongside the more mystical rituals of witchcraft and dark magic including the use of poisons and the creation of zombies.

Modern day Haitians are mostly practising Catholics and since the Pope's visit in 1983 the ten dioceses on the island have flourished. Yet Voodoo is and will always remain an intrinsic part of Haitian culture and beliefs. Haitians can maintain both a Catholic and Voodooist following as, for example, Voodoo ceremonies are not allowed to take place during key Christian festivals including Easter and Christmas. Although some of the rituals involved in the two religions are radically different, both Catholic and Voodoo ceremonies involve reading from the Bible and reciting the same prayers, plus candles and flowers are some of the symbols common to both religions.

Ogude (1981) confirms that a shared memory of slavery has defined and continues to shape black people today. And as Voodoo played a key role in the Haitian survival of the slave trade it continues to provide the islanders with a common identity and connection with their past. According to Andrews and Leopold (2013), participating in religious ritual, whatever that ritual may be, is a public expression of a shared understanding and acceptance of a common identity. Therefore it is understandable that on this small Caribbean island which has endured a tumultuous history, two such divergent religions jointly provide a Haitian identity.

Key Concepts

Tourism in Developing Countries

Haiti is by current standards a developing country. It suffers from a very poor level of human development with life expectancy at 62 years. 50% of the adult population are illiterate, 60% are unemployed and 65% of Haitians are living below the poverty threshold (Roc 2008). Despite once having a thriving tourism industry, Haiti is now one of the least visited of the Caribbean islands for three main reasons: the political instability; the climate of insecurity and last but not least, the lack of facilities for tourists (Séraphin 2011). Furthermore Haiti is unable to attract foreign direct investment (FDI) and therefore economic recovery must be delivered from within the country thus the performance of the destination is utterly dependent on the Haitian community.

In their *Action Plan for National Recovery and Development of Haiti*, the Haitian government has identified tourism as a critical economic activity that can contribute to recovery. The newly appointed Minister for Tourism, Stéphanie Balmir-Villedrouin has already obtained support for the plan from the World Travel Organisation, airlines such as *Air Caraïbes*; tour operators such as *Nomade*; and tour guides including *Lonely Planet*. These encouraging developments have confirmed the long-term commitment of the government to the development of Haiti and although the plan for regeneration is ambitious, the Haitians have a history of determination and resilience to realise these plans. The majority of government funding is allocated to marketing and the development of visitor accommodation. Naturally

these are key elements of a successful tourism campaign but a program of events is also vital to the long term success of a tourism strategy. Bowdin *et al* (2010) and Bladen *et al* (2012) agree that cultural events in particular should form part of a public sector strategy. These types of events have the potential to strengthen community cohesion and contribute to social capital. Furthermore as Getz (2012) confirms, tourists are particularly interested in having an authentic cultural experience in the destination and such events can be comparatively low cost to organise.

Tourism, Cultural Identity and Social Representation

Despite the plan for the rejuvenation of the tourism industry in Haiti, some organisations are voicing their concerns about the proposals. Tourism Concern (Barnett 2010) are particularly apprehensive about the country's ability to foster a sustainable economy based on tourism. Principally they warn that it could have a negative impact on the destination's culture (Holden 2013). Furthermore Nunn (2008) asserts that a culture of mistrust has evolved in Haiti as an emergence from survival of slavery and it can be argued that despite the abolition of this practice, the spirit of slavery remains in the form of a systematic pillaging of the public funds by those in office which has kept the people in poverty for centuries (Thomson 2004). However, in an effort to support the hospitality sector, the government has invested in the conversion of residents' homes into guest houses. This initiative is a low cost investment which results in an increase in the amount of visitor accommodation, provides some of the poorest of the Haitian population with employment and involves them in the country's economic development. Moreover, staying in a guest house is another way of providing the tourist with the authentic experience they are seeking. Thomson (2004) and Metraux (1958) also indicate that hospitality providers are best placed to be intermediaries between Houngan and tourist. Local hoteliers and guest house owners are able to facilitate the arrangements for

visitors to attend staged Voodoo ceremonies. However, critics may argue that employment within the tourism, hospitality and events sectors is once again putting Haitians into submissive roles and thus it may represent a re-enactment of slavery.

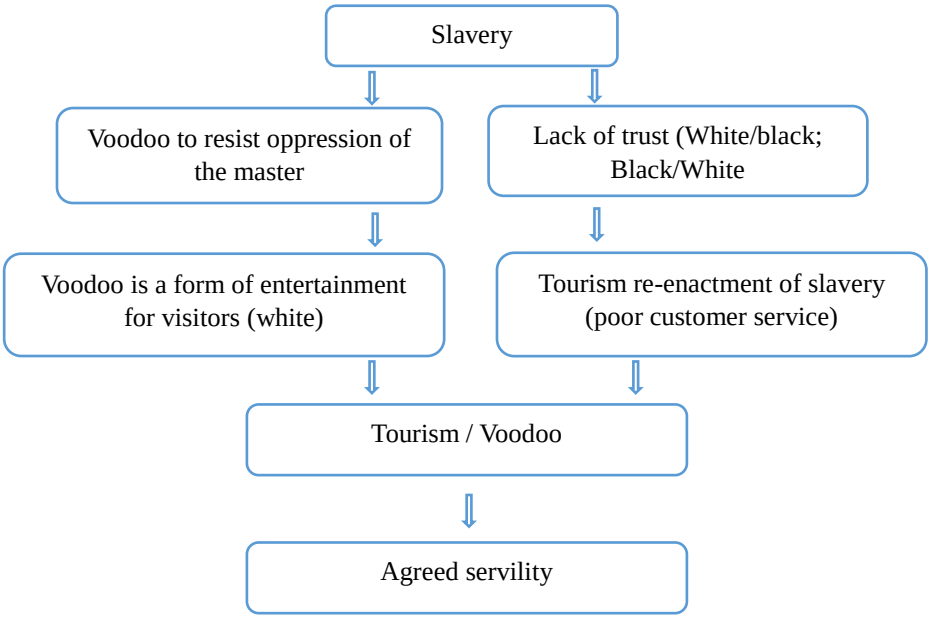
Ogude (1981) contends that the common shared racial memory of slavery has defined and continues to shape black people today; slavery is the fate of an entire race, and is unfinished business. As it is widely accepted that tourism in third world countries is strongly associated with servility should the government's plans for developing tourism and ergo hospitality and events be approached with caution? Given that Haiti cannot attract FDI, tourism offers the country a realistic (and possibly the only) chance of economic prosperity. The tourism offering is utterly dependent on the performance of the destination, and thus the community. As Voodoo is almost unique to Haiti it may provide the island with a unique selling proposition. Thus a tourism offering that includes authentic guest house accommodation and attendance at a Voodoo ceremony may enable the country to enter into a vastly competitive global industry.

Should such a visitor experience be established, it will be important for the government to monitor the cultural development of the people of Haiti alongside this. This may be achieved via the use of a social representation framework which relates directly to the development of tourism (Meliou and Maroudas 2010). Social representation is a collective system of meanings which may be expressed, or whose effects may be observed, in values, ideas and practices. Such a model can be used to understand how different groups think about tourism (Pearce *et al*. 1991). In other words, social representations are products of interconnectedness between people and processes of references through which we conceive the world (Deaux and Philogene 2001). They are built on a shared knowledge and understanding of a common reality (Moscovici 1961). Thus tourism and events in Haiti which are built around Voodoo

rituals and practises have the potential to become a social framework by which Haitians can recognise and celebrate their cultural history and identity.

To explain this idea further, Figure 15.1 illustrates the development of the relationship between slavery, Voodoo and tourism. Voodoo emerges as a means to endure oppression and today it is evolving as a form of entertainment for visitors. In parallel to this development we see how Voodoo was established as a result of a lack of trust between the black slaves and the white masters and how today tourism replicates this relationship between customer and tourist (Séraphin and Butler 2013). Today both tourism practices and Voodoo events are examples of agreed servility.

Figure 15.1 the link between Voodoo and tourism in Haiti



Analysis, Results and Discussion

Voodoo Ceremonies as a Commercial Product

Thomson's work *Bonjour Blanc, a journey through Haiti* provides detailed information about the destination and his journey illustrates the concept of adventure tourism. Although he travelled all over Haiti, he rarely visited popular local tourist sites or areas. Instead he chose to spend time with the locals and as an unconventional travel writer he took advantage of several opportunities to attend authentic Voodoo ceremonies.

Thomson presents a very detailed description of the rituals inherent in the Voodoo ceremonies: one must be over 25 in order to attend; one must bring specific gifts to the ceremonies to give to the Houngan (tallow candles and bottles of rum); a particular dress code should be observed (black trousers or skirt and red shirt), attendees bear torches and proceed to the temple at the pace of a funeral cortege, there follows a procedure of handshaking and exchanging passwords with the Houngan at the entrance of the temple, once inside a drum roll signifies the start of the séance and cabbalistic signs are traced in front of the altar with maize flour. Finally, there are prayers and singing.

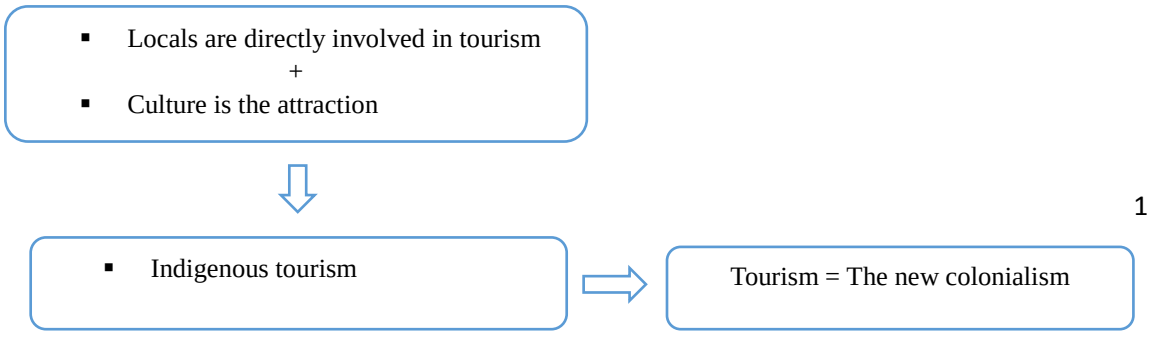
Thomson was invited to attend events that were not purely for his entertainment but that were authentic religious ceremonies. Despite admitting that they left him feeling terrified, he continued to attend them and usually paid for this privilege noting that 'a Voodoo priest is usually an astute businessman' (2004: 202). He also explains that tourists could make similar

arrangements to attend a modified Voodoo event at their hotel: 'Friday night in the Oloffson [hotel] was traditionally the night for a voodoo extravaganza carefully choreographed by ... the showgirls' (2004:46). These events consisted of mostly dancing and drumming and clearly they are designed to entertain and not terrify the audience. Their authenticity is questionable, especially given the hotel environment, nonetheless Thomson infers that the Houngan were content with the arrangements and their performances were well received.

Tourism, Events and Colonisation

Indigenous tourism is identifiable when indigenous people are directly involved in a form of tourism either through control of the operation and / or when their culture is the attraction. It is embedded in an industry that is dominated by non-indigenous individuals and organisations (Hinch and Butler 1996). Lovelock and Lovelock (2013) highlight that the history of tourism is closely linked to the history of imperialism, hence the reason tourism has been labelled the 'new colonialism' (Figure 15.2) where indigenous populations are re-colonialized by an industry which relies on their presence for its consumption. The academic viewpoint is that the tourism industry is a double-edged sword for indigenous populations. On one hand it offers the potential for indigenous people to market themselves and take advantage of economic gain from the commodification of culture. On the other hand, there are a number of factors that mitigate against the tourism industry serving as a panacea for the challenges faced by indigenous populations.

Figure 15.2 Tourism: The new colonialism



This raises the following questions:

- How much control do Houngans have over the type of performance they deliver?
- How much control do locals in Haiti have over their tourism product?
- What are the impacts of tourism on the evolution of Voodoo and overall, on local culture?

Thomson's (2004) insight into Voodoo events combined with Metraux's (1958) description of the Houngan as priest, healer, fortune teller, exerciser and entertainer suggest several answers. In all descriptions of Voodoo ceremonies, it is clear that the Houngan is in control of the performance. This is evident when the performance is part of an authentic event at a temple and the attendees take an active role in the ritual, and when the performance is staged in a hotel where visitors have a passive role. Andrews and Leopold (2013) suggest that whether or not the audience are passive or active, within a staged event such as a Voodoo demonstration, the performer directs the event. This places the performer in control of the event and this is the key to the successful embedding of Voodoo events within Haiti's tourism offer as Haitians are no longer in servile roles. Furthermore, it is of great importance to involve the locals in the tourism sector so that they contribute to the visitor experience (Séraphin 2013). As Voodoo is an integral part of the island's culture, sharing this with visitors can also contribute to Haitians developing a better self-awareness, understanding and acceptance of this heritage.

Additionally, history has shown that both the Houngan and the Voodoo religion (which was developed as a means to survive difficult conditions) are flexible and perfectly able to adapt to their environment in order to survive. Thus we can conclude that Voodoo events can adapt into tourism products to meet the needs of different visitors without necessarily losing authenticity. The tourism product is often viewed as synonymous with the destination, because there is an amalgam of destination elements including attractions and supporting services such as accommodation, food, beverage and transportation (Cooper and Hall 2008). Hotel based Voodoo events still have the potential to offer a culturally rich experience to visitors. However, this needs further investigation and it could be of value to reconsider the role of the tourist in a Voodoo event as much more than that of a consumer but equally a producer (Hirschman and Holbrook 1982: 132-140) or a co-creator (Chronis, 2005).

It must however also be noted that there is little data that informs us of the beneficiary impacts of tourism development on the poor. Existing data tends to be at the micro-level focusing on a single enterprise or a community (Holden 2013). Because of this newness of the information it is legitimate to wonder if Voodoo as a tourism product is worth being exploited in Haiti as it may be damageable for this ancestral religion in the long term. Of course the danger of the commodification of religious events is that they may lose authenticity. Interestingly both Andrews and Leopold (2013) and Getz (2012) assert that the commodification of religious events created by an indigenous population in particular, can have a particular cultural value and power which can negate the effects of colonisation. Furthermore they suggest that should a community feel that there was an over commodification of a tradition based event, they would not abandon it but seek to change it. Thus, this notion gives hope to our suggestion that Voodoo events are a realistic proposition for the future prosperity of Haiti.

Conclusion

Since the election of Stéphanie Balmir-Villedrouin as the Tourism Minister, the Haitian government has designated the tourism sector as the vehicle for the economic development of the country. As Haiti lacks visitor attractions the development of an authentic events programme is going to be an essential part of the on-going tourism strategy. Culturally rich events are part of the appeal of a destination and can be cost efficient to organise. Furthermore it is well documented that planned events have the ability to improve communities, as:

> They provide the means to achieve a diverse range of social outcomes, including community cohesion, educational development, support for families and regional development (Bladen *et al* 2012: 379).

If the development of events can provide positive social outcomes for the Haitians, the performance of this revived community will increase. O'Toole (2011:18) suggests that a programme of events and festivals are crucial to increasing national pride in small developing countries in a post-colonial state of recovery. He goes on to give examples of destination management organisation led strategies that combine events and tourism objectives and gives examples of how these have been successfully implemented in other countries. These provide both an overview and an insight into the complexities of such strategies and reinforce the notion that both tourism and events are interdependent. Thus the development of Voodoo

events will enhance Haiti's tourism offering and provide opportunities for locals to embrace their cultural heritage and come to terms with their past, if this process is carefully managed.

Butler and Séraphin (2014) argue that, social enterprises in the tourism sector can contribute to a peaceful relationship between local and visitors via an increase of trust. This is possible if corporate social responsibility practices are locally embedded; addressing not only environmental, philanthropic and economic aims but particularly citizen diplomacy and transparency aims. The tourism sector in Haiti is still at its maiden stage and therefore it is very difficult to assess its impact on the country. However, many academics have highlighted the fact that mass tourism has positive and negative impacts on a destination. With the development of the tourism sector in Haiti we can rightly assume that the industry is going to progressively have an impact on the different components of Haitian society including religion.

For the moment there is no evidence to confirm that tourism will bring prosperity to Haiti or that Voodoo events can play a significant role in the country's tourism sector. While Voodoo is sometimes used as a commercial product in Haiti, so far this has been occasional and thus the religion has managed so far to keep its essence and original function. However, our research indicates that Voodoo events are a viable means to supporting the tourism industry. How they are developed requires further, detailed investigation and involvement of the local community and religious leaders. The challenge here is to develop an enjoyable and authentic visitor experience of Voodoo rituals which does not detract from the role of the religion to the Haitian community.

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